

Date: 3 May, 1983

Interview With: Otis McKinley

Interviewed by: Welliver and Lawler

Place: Evanston Holiday Inn

Observations: Mr. McKinley is an owner of 3 Best Cabs. He does quite a bit of driving for NUS Programs on Women and African studies.

Q. We're interested in your personal memories concerning race relations in Evanston.

A. You know the theatre. We had to sit on the second floor. It wasn't de-segregated until 1936.

Q. Was that because of Jourdain?

A. Jourdain was the one fighting. I had no trouble in school until high school.

Q. When were you born?

A. June 1, 1923 at Cook County Hospital. We were poor.

Q. Is that because you couldn't use Evanston Hospital?

A. No, because we were broke. We were on aid. We did have Evanston Hospital.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. In South Carolina.

Q. Where in South Carolina?

A. McCormick or Abbeville. Somewhere around there. They were in the country just near a town.

Q. When did they come here?

A. My mother came in 1914. There were a bunch of them up here. When one got a job, they'd send for someone else.

Q. What did she do?

A. She did day work.

Q. What did your father do?

A. He was a mail carrier, then he got a job as a mechanic for Greyhound.

Q. Tell us about your school.

A. I didn't have any problems in school. I went to Noyes, Foster and ETHS.

Q. Were you transferred to Foster?

A. No, we just moved to the area. We lived there, but they were transferring blacks to the area.

Q. Were the teachers at Foster all white?

A. Yes. We never thought we would have black teachers.

Q. Were there a lot of black kids attending college - in teacher training colleges?

A. No. The first group of black college kids was in 1937-38. Nobody had any money. When Great Lakes opened in 1940-41, they had 40 jobs - these paid 10¢ an hour more than other jobs - Lots of people showed up. When I went to work on the Southern Pacific I started at 23¢ an hour waiting tables. When Pearl Harbor came I was making 30¢ an hour.

Q. How long did you work on the railroad?

A. 1½ years. My mother got my wages and I got to keep the tips. If some guy tipped 15¢ he thought he was a real big spender.

Q. Was Foster all black by the time you got there?

A. 100%..

Q. We heard that they gave work certificates instead of diplomas at Foster.

A. I don't know anything about work certificates. They did have a lot of older kids there. They left for the CCC camp.

Q. Why were these older kids still in school?

A. They were from the south. They were behind in school. Noyes was less than 5% black.

Q. Did they bus the kids to Foster school.

A. No - There was no busing. Everybody had to walk. The bus fare was 3¢ and you couldn't stop it anyway.

Q. Tell us about High School.

A. There was a prejudiced group at the high school. You couldn't have any all-black intramural teams but you could have all white teams. The football team had only one black and the basketball team always had to have one white.

Q. Whose policy was this?

A. I guess it was the policy of the Physical Education Department.

Q. Did you play any sports?

A. Football. I played for 1½ years then I decided I wanted a job.

Q. Did you have any white friends?

A. I used to play sandlot ball with my white friends. I played with Alex Agase - you know the football coach. The kids got along O.K. It was the parents who caused the trouble.

Q. What about in the classroom?

A. I never had any problem with the teachers. I had no sense of any problems. The teachers had no time. They didn't bother you unless you were wrong. There was one liberal - minded civics teacher who they fired. He criticized things - talked about Communism.

Q. Is it true that a lot of blacks who came to Evanston after WWI were from Mississippi instead of Abbeville?

A. Most blacks came to Evanston to work. They did mostly domestic work. There were no standards. For a 55 hour week you got paid \$27.50 every two weeks at the Orrington. The Dominion Room paid \$5 more. That was a promotion. Some worked at Northwestern.

Q. No factories?

A. Marks Control - Dempster and Dodge. My uncle worked there for 40 years.

Q. Were there any jobs you knew you couldn't apply for?

A. You couldn't work for the bus company. It was segregated for years. They asked the churches to do something about it but they said "That's not our business." Finally a black lady at the police department got them in the bus company.

Q. Was she a policewoman?

A. Yes. Her name was Inez Washington. She has a son that's with them (the police) now. That's when I gave up church.

Q. Before you gave it up, which church did you attend?

A. 2nd Baptist.

Q. How much did your mother earn?

A. My mother made \$7 a week. My uncle was with the WPA. He made \$27.50 every two weeks because he had a family.

Q. Did your mother live-in?

A. No, she came home evenings.

Q. Were all of the domestics in Evanston black?

A. They were 90% black, but they brought in lots of white girls - Germans, Poles, Russians - to keep prices down. When they (white domestics) found out what was what they left.

Q. Did you have any contact with Northwestern when you were young?

A. No, by the time I reached that age I was in the service. They came and got me in 1942.

Q. Were you in the army?

A. I was in the Seebes.

Q. Wasn't that a lily -white outfit?

A. It used to be, but then Joe Louis did a benefit fight for the Navy. He didn't do us any favor!

Q. Was it an all black outfit?

A. Yes. We were based in Gulfport, Mississippi. We couldn't buy a drink on the base there, and we couldn't use live ammunition.

Q. Was Mississippi a shock after Evanston?

A. Yes, but you learn that the difference was that the man in the South tells you to your face he doesn't like you, but in the North he says he likes you but still doesn't.

Q. Is Evanston better now?

A. There is some difference. There are nice working opportunities now. You couldn't find good jobs in the old days.

Q. Did you ever think of leaving Evanston?

A. No. I raised four kids here and put them through college, and I own three cabs. 90% of the time, nobody gave me a hard time. I make 90% of my money off whites. (Long digression concerning acquaintances in P.A.S. and Program on Women).

Q. Did you belong to any clubs?

A. Not many. I did belong to the Young Men's Democratic Club for one year. Everybody was Democratic, there were very few Republicans. For years there was only one Democrat in City Hall.

Q. What do you remember about Jourdain?

A. He had lots of support, but he got a little greedy. The Young Men's Democratic Organization insisted that businessmen in the neighborhood hike black workers. We asked Jourdain to come and speak, but he refused. Later, when he was running for re-election, we heard from him, but we told him we weren't interested any more.

Q. Do you remember the first election?

A. There was a big party at the Masonic Temple. Everyone worked hard for the election. I was 10-12 years old at the time.

Q. We heard that NU students helped in the campaign.

A. The best thing about Evanston is Northwestern, because of all the liberals. I knew the first black football player at Northwestern - Bernice Jefferson. This was in 1936. He had a great job - he took the "El" up to Dyche every evening and locked the gates, then he went home.

Q. What do you know about the house movings in Evanston?

A. Nobody was moved who didn't want to be.

Q. Could you live anywhere?

A. Where you lived depended on what you could afford. I could have bought a house over on the lakeshore if I wanted to. I live south of Dempster Street now - there were no blacks living there when I grew up. The Evanston Bus Company was a good place to work.

Q. When did you start there?

A. 21 years ago. I left there 8 years ago.

Q. When did your father work for Greyhound?

A. In the late 1930's and early 1940's. He was a mechanic - they didn't have any black drivers.

Q. What other jobs did you have?

A. I worked for Paschen Brothers Construction.

Q. When?

A. Before the bus company. I also worked at Baxter Laboratories and Sarah Lee's. I was a miner in the tunnel for a while.

Q. What was the first job you had when you left high school?

A. I worked for the North Shore Line at 18¢ an hour, waiting tables. I moved over to the Southern Pacific because they paid 23¢ an hour.

Q. What recreation facilities did you have?

A. It was lousy for blacks. Anywhere there was liquor was always closed down by the police. The white ones weren't. Evanston was dry then but the whites could go to the Elks. We had the Masons.

Q. Did they have a bar?

A. No. Never could have got away with it. There was Shorty Pitt's bar, where the Martin Station is now. They had a little band. All the colored people went there. Around the time of the war. They had to pay off the police or someone.

Q. No other recreation?

A. We played softball at Foster - soccer in Noyes. Played a lot of softball. We had no money.

Q. Were you a Cub or Sox fan?

A. Not a Sox fan. Rather go to Cubs Park.

Q. Are you a Cub fan?

A. I didn't say that. I like baseball.

Q. Could you go to any parks or playgrounds in Evanston?

A. Yes, but your buddies wouldn't be there. The Polish went to Boatwood. The blacks to Foster. On the whole, there was not much of a racial problem. Even when they brought up busing. I don't understand why they decided to do it.

Q. When did you go to Foster School?

A. In 7th grade. I went to Noyes before. Everybody who lived west of the tracks went to Foster. I always thought the people that lived on Ridge were rich. Then I grew up and found out they were renting. In the late thirties they had a street party on Garnett Place - used to be Ayers. They were so poor - they only had to move one car.

Q. Where do you live now?

A. McDaniel and Greenleaf.

Q. When did you move there?

A. In the sixties.

Q. That wasn't a black neighborhood. Did you have any problem with the neighbors?

A. No, except for the parties I used to have. I was single.

Q. Were you ever a member of the NAACP?

A. No. I thought about it but clubs and organizations are headaches. Evanston has always been a good place to live, to get a job. Times were tough in the thirties.

Q. Only for blacks?

A. No, everyone. You could see people lined up at the welfare (in the 30's) - 2-1/2 blocks long - to get relief - when it was 20 below zero. Times were bad then.

